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AUTHOR Merren, John
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ABSTRACT

The primary needs of offenders seem to be the abilities to make appropriate decisions about their behavior and to make the decisions in appropriate social and ethical contexts. Meeting these needs should logically be the first priority of offender programs. The high priority of improving decision making need not mean that other offender needs must be ignored. Critical thinking curricula hold the greatest promise for correctional education. A suggested model instructs all offenders at the first opportunity in improved methods of problem solving. The learners who remain for subsequent classes can use their new skills in basic academic classes, vocational training, or postsecondary programs. One curriculum that fits this model is being piloted in the Correctional Service of Canada. This program is a "core" for personal development that teaches a wide variety of thinking and problem-solving techniques and then requires their application through role playing, games, and puzzles. To transfer such skills to other contexts, they should become integrated into all subsequent offender education. Vocational education particularly lends itself to problem-solving approaches, since most mechanical and electrical trades involve troubleshooting. Academic classes have limitless opportunities to include such elements. Special planning to redirect program activities is necessary. Priorities during this redirection include staff training, leadership provided by a task force, and participant follow-up. (YLB)

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Thoughts on the Future of Correctional Education (An article in four installments)

-John Merren, Ph.D.,
Coordinator of Occupational Education
Pima Community College
Tucson, Arizona

After fourteen years in correctional education, I am moving on to another realm of endeavor. During my tenure in prison teaching and supervision, I continually searched for the best educational content to provide offenders to help them succeed as law abiding citizens after release. Sometimes as I look back I doubt that I and others even asked the right questions to determine curriculum content. At this point in the history of correctional education, I believe some better questions and answers are emerging.

A variety of books and articles have been published in the last ten years which suggest that offenders make deliberate decisions about criminal activity. In the opinion of these authors, although decisions to commit crimes may be poor ones, they are based on motivations which are largely caused by a personal gratification from criminal behavior rather than by social or economic deprivation. As a result, the faith we have had in assuming that the primary need of offenders for GED's and job specific training to improve ex-offenders employment prospects may be flawed. Their greatest need would seem to be the ability to make appropriate decisions about their behavior on a minute to minute bases. Added to this need is that the decisions be made in appropriate social and ethical contexts. If these are the primary needs, then meeting them should logically be the first priority of offender programs.

While some offenders certainly have other educational needs which are obvious, such as illiteracy, their inability to make appropriate decisions for morally and civically acceptable behavior is universal. Their behavior based on flawed decisions resulted in criminal conviction. If this universal need is to be met, program content to enhance social and ethical decision making must have the highest priority. Indeed, I would argue that society is poorly served by pouring resources into programs which provide criminals with only academic and vocational skills while making scant difference in their decisions to engage in postrelease criminal activity.

The high priority of improving decision making, however, need

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not mean that other offender needs must be ignored. Indeed, curriculum designs which seek to meet multiple needs can enhance the effectiveness of redesigned programs with traditional educational goals. Already many public school curricula have been redesigned to include elements of critical thinking to improve the use students make of the knowledge and skills they learn. Of all the strategies developed to address "a nation at risk," the critical thinking movement holds the greatest promise. As a result, curricula now exist to form the basis for a "new" correctional education.

Next installment: some specific critical thinking curricula.

Critical Thinking Curricula in Correctional Education
(Part Two of Four)

-John Merren, Ph.D.
Director of Occupational Education
Pima Community College
Tucson, Arizona

The structures and priorities of correctional education suggest that while integration of critical thinking into the curriculum is an ultimate goal, offenders should be first instructed in thinking techniques as separate coursework. The universal need for improving offender thinking combined with the sometimes brief period of probation, incarceration, or parole indicates that the first priority is to instruct all offenders at the first opportunity in improved methods of problem solving. The learners who remain for subsequent classes can use their new skills in basic academic classes, vocational training, or postsecondary programs.

One curriculum which fits this model is being piloted in the Correctional Service of Canada, a federal system of prisons and community corrections. This program is a "core" for personal development rather than academic and vocational education and addresses offender deficits identified through research procedures. The specific model of criminal behavior holds that an offender's thinking, world view, and values have determined his anti-social behavior. The research for this approach was well documented in the book Time to Think by Robert Ross and Elizabeth Fabiano, who developed this curriculum in response to the research findings. As a result, the program teaches a wide variety of thinking and problem solving techniques and then requires their application through role playing, games, and puzzles. A forthcoming book by Ross, Thinking Straight, describes the details.

While the primary target for this Canadian curriculum is adult offenders, Katherine Larson of the University of California, Santa Barbara, has developed "Social Thinking Skills" for juvenile offenders. Piloted by the California Youth Authority, its focus is on problem identification, impulse control, and step by step problem solving.

A couple of examples will illustrate the types of activities in these courses. Edward deBono has developed an instructional system based on a series of specific thinking skills.

"Consider All Factors" is a lesson on brainstorming prior to decision making. (See de Bono's Thinking Course, 1985.) The initial applications are on personal, seemingly trivial issues: "What are the factors involved in choosing your hairstyle?" The results of success in teaching an offender to always consider all factors before acting are clear: fewer crimes would be committed if potential perpetrators considered the feelings of victims, the consequences of their actions, the potential for arrest, and the alternatives to quick thrills. For such a skill to become automatic, however, it must be practiced endlessly.

Another technique to add a social context for decisions is to pose an ethical delimma. "Should a nurse leave her station in a hospital to attend a bleeding man several blocks away?" While such a question may have no "right" answer, the opinions, arguments, questions, and discussions all lead to practice in thinking and ethical decision making.

Such approaches require offenders to practice skills which they probably have never before known or seen. For such skills to transfer to other contexts, they should become integrated into all subsequent offender education.

Next: Critical thinking in academic and vocational correctional curricula.

Critical Thinking in Correctional Academic and Vocational Courses
(Part Three of Four)

-John Merren, Ph.D.
Director of Occupational Education
Pima Community College
Tucson, Arizona

Given the importance and potential effectiveness of critical thinking instruction for offenders, its delivery needs to be not only in "content-free" classes, but also integrated into academic and vocational curriculum. Such approaches as a skill to "Consider All Options" or the discussion of ethical delimmas may be integrated into the curriculum of any academic or vocational subject in order both to force continuing practice in thinking and to increase the learning activity of students. Experiences in transfering these skills to different contexts will encourage students to apply them to situations of personal living.

Vocational education particularly lends itself to problem solving approaches, since most mechanical and electrical trades involve troubleshooting, which itself is a problem solving technique. The key, I believe, to adding a special dimension is to "articulate" a critical thinking program with vocational and other courses. In such a pattern, specific techniques, such as "Consider All Options" would be repeated throughout the course. The opportunities for integrating ethical questions for discussion are also endless. Whole college courses on ethics in the workplace are now emerging, so using the context of a traditional vocational class for discussion of ethical delimmas should not be difficult.

A couple of examples from automotive mechanics can illustrate the technique: Students are told that a car comes in for service with a loud squeeking noise when the engine is running. They are asked to "Consider All Options" concerning the cause and remedy. While including such discussion may be nothing new for such a class, putting it into the context of a previously learned thinking skill reinforces the breadth of applications of that skill.

If the class decides to choose a fanbelt for the cause and its replacment as a remedy, the following ethical delimma may be posed: the customer has indicated that he needs the car tomorrow and has only $50.00 to spend on repairs. The fan belt to be

replaced costs $35.00 in parts and labor. For $55.00 all his belts can be changed, and they need it. He is unavailable until he returns for his car. Should all the belts be changed?

Academic classes, whether basic skills, personal development, or postsecondary, have limitless opportunities to include such elements. Several correctional programs have included seminars on the critical issues of current public policy as part of their curricula by using the National Issues Forum, a commercially available discussion series. Offenders debate the questions of homelessness, child care for working mothers, and budget deficits on the basis of the information provided. As a result "Consider All Factors" and ethical delimmas have a ripe opportunity for implementation. Reading, writing, and mathematics skills can all be tied to such content. Part of the success in such an approach, however requires offender to work in groups, which itself may be instructive for interpesonal skill development. To reinforce the transfer of the specified skills in all these contexts, each specific skill should be referred to by name, for example "Consider All Options."

In order to deliver such a carefully organized set of thinking skill strands throughout a correctional program, careful planning and staff development are required. The result, however, may well be a framework for the long-sought "seamless tube" of correctional programming from sentencing to release from supervison.

Next: Planning, administrative, and staff development issues.

Implementing a Correctional Program in Critical Thought (Last in a series of Four)

-John Merren, Ph.D.,
Director of Occupational Education,
Pima Community College,
Tucson, Arizona

As the preceding installments have suggested, an effective critical thinking program consists of both classes specifically devoted to thinking techniques and courses with a more orthodox focus which use critical thinking as a teaching methodology. In order to deliver such instruction, a number of special planning activities should take place. Even though administrators and instructors may be open to a new approach, they may be unaware of the scope and throughness of the changes involved.

It is also of immense value to include correctional administration and custody staff in the initial stages of discussion. One of the features of this new approach to correctional education is that it makes the offenders who participate more manageable since they are more likely to think before they act. Its effectiveness is increased in an institutional setting if the entire staff, especially correctional officers, reinforce the lessons taught. Their cooperation, therefore, can make their jobs as well as those of the instructors easier.

A four stage approach for implementing such a redirection of program activities seems necessary. Step 1 is to develop on the part of all involved a general awareness of both the common sense benefits and the research based findings regarding critical thinking approaches. Step 2 is to pilot a project with interested staff of a specific unit with careful evaluation of all activities. Step 3 is a phased implementation using the results of the pilot as a guide. A sequence of units should be chosen with evaluation remaining as a prime priority. Step 4 is to make the new approach routine, with modifications resulting from what has been learned in previous implementation.

Throughout these steps, there are specific priorities. Clearly of the most important is staff training. One of the features of the "pure thinking" classes is that instructors may be persons other than traditionally certified teachers. Counselors, correctional officers, chaplains, or anyone whose personality or social skills lend themselves to group leadership may be used. As a result, adding content-free classes in critical thinking to

a program may not require additional staff.

Throughout the initial process, a task force or team of correctional workers needs to provide leadership and research skills to investigate the publications which exist, to consult with other jurisdictions, to locate and recommentd consultants, and to monitor and report the progress of the project.

This task force can provide leadership in the design of staff training, in the development of curriculum manuals, and in communicating progress to the staff as a whole. Consultants who are employed should not necessarily be used to produce a specific thinking-based curriculum, but rather to design a system for such development. With the guidance and leadership of administration and the task force, individual instructors can develop their own curricular modifications to incorporate thinking skills into their classes.

After experiencing success in using problem solving approaches, the staff should be encouraged to develop the curriculum further to include skills in problem identification and problem statement formulation, all of which should remain instructional methods rather than replacing current content learning objectives. From such a perspective, then the offender's learning has been enhanced both for transfer to life experiences and for greater success with the skills and content of the subjects taught.

Ultimately, the specific thinking skills in a program sequence could tie together many facets of a formerly fragmented correctional program: basic education, vocational training, pre-release classes, postsecondary education, and even some counseling and therapy. The ultimate posttest, of course, is how these programs transfer into offenders' decision making in life, how their personal lives are enhanced, how they manage stress, how their values are changed, and how they view themselves as citizens. If at all possible, the program which enters into such a new approach should include in the evaluation procedures a followup of participants once they leave correctional supervision. The postrelease success of participants can both strengthen the case for program resources and indicate adjustments which may further improve the program.